
Reviewed by Lewis Wilson

Students of the Pentecostal Movement should meet the Tathams of Fresno, California. Sociological studies have tended to be impersonal, and histories have examined little more than the Pentecostal forest noting only the more prominent trees. Oral Roberts and a few other celebrities have been studied in impressive detail, and Daniel Epstein’s recent *Sister Aimee* provides yet another look at the most publicized of all Pentecostals. But what of the unchronicled masses who early joined the new religion that seemed strange to so much of society? Did their decision prove rewarding? If so, how successful were they in transmitting such an experiential faith to their children? What of their grandchildren and even great-grandchildren? Would the descendants of “the Lord’s despised few” determine that their inherited Pentecostal faith was compatible with affluence, social standing, and higher education? Answers to such questions are at least suggested as the story of four generations of Tathams unfolds in Dan Morgan’s book.

That was not his original intention. An Ivy League-educated, “stuffy Episcopalian” who has worked for the Washington Post as editor, reporter, and foreign correspondent for thirty years, his real interest was the dust bowl migration of the 1930s. For this, his second book, he chose a real life counterpart of Steinbeck’s fictional Joad family to determine how it had fared in California during the Great Depression and after. The family selected, the Tathams, just happened to be Pentecostal.

Oca and Ruby Tatham, who like the Joads, lived near Sallisaw, Oklahoma, wanted the better life they believed could be found in California. So in 1934, they loaded their two children, his parents, and ten other relatives and friends onto the homemade bed of the 1929 Chevrolet truck Oca had purchased for fifty dollars, and started west. A serious but non-fatal accident outside Albuquerque threatened to end the trip, but seven days after leaving home, the happy crew waded into the Pacific Ocean at Santa Monica before continuing north into the San Joaquin Valley town of McFarland. There, working in grapes and cotton, they experienced the hardships common to migrant fruit laborers during the Great Depression, but California was to prove much kinder to the Tathams than to the Joads. Through hard work, creative entrepreneurial enterprise and strong family support, they not only weathered the thirties in California but most, some after several trips, chose to make it their permanent home.
The outbreak of war dramatically changed their lives and opened new opportunities. Oca, the story's central figure, spent the war years as a trucker servicing government contracts along the West Coast from Arizona to Washington settling for a time in Oregon. But even before war's end, he had moved his family to the Central Valley city of Fresno which was to remain home for his branch of the Tatham clan. Through hard work, astute investments, and simple living Oca gradually became modestly wealthy. Though he neither sought nor realized social standing and had little appreciation for higher education, his three sons and three daughters were assured a comfortable middle-class life.

Though all would do well, the second son, Bill, soon was making more money than his father, eventually allowing him to invest in a World Football League franchise along with Donald Trump. In the process, the Tatham clan gained recognition, economic leverage, social status, and political clout. Its children went to college, entered the professions, and encountered many of the problems common to middle-class America in the second half of the twentieth century.

It is a complex story of many lives and themes made even more complicated by the introduction of a second and unrelated “Okie” family, the Tacketts. But the book belongs to the Tathams, and their faith is probably its most prominent theme. From descriptions of services at their Free Holiness church outside Sallisaw to Oca’s benedictory prayer for Morgan at book’s end, it is obvious that their Pentecostal faith has played an important, if not the dominant, role in the lives of most Tathams.

Morgan finds this fascinating and devotes generous sections of his book to Pentecostal history and the impact of the faith on select members of four generations. Though he tells their stories, he offers few judgments and generalizations. Unlike Steinbeck who portrays religion in a negative light, Morgan sees it as a positive force in the Tatham family. He deliberately challenges the views of New Deal bureaucrats who “often saw Okie religious feelings as a bad habit that needed to be broken,” and shows the Tatham’s faith as productive in forging community, helping the poor and needy, and even opening educational and leadership opportunities to people who might otherwise not have had them. He concludes one chapter with Oca’s reflections on the role of the church in his family’s life during the Depression: “What else did we have? We didn’t have everything, but we had peace and joy.”

Morgan’s treatment of religious life also provides insight into the interplay between cultural and religious change. Though Oca’s father gave up after several attempts, his mother, an early Oklahoma convert, remained such a committed Pentecostal that her Delano Pentecostal Holiness Church honored her with a plaque in its foyer when she died at ninety-five. From his life-changing conversion as a young husband,